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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the history of early childhood education in China between 1949 and 1990. After the Communist revolution in 1949, China's educational policy was modeled after the Soviet Union's. Preschool pedagogy emphasized conditioning children's behavior and providing a comfortable environment for children. The number of nurseries and kindergartens grew steadily in the late 1950s. After the Cultural Revolution in 1966, the emphasis in early childhood education changed from providing a comfortable environment to carrying out proletarian politics, and many preschools were closed. The administration of preschools was taken from trained professionals and given to ideologically correct committees. School activities, such as songs and stories, centered around revolutionary ideology. The purpose of preschools was to provide protective care and develop children who would continue the revolution. After the arrest of the Gang of Four in 1976, many preschools were reopened. China then turned to the United States and Japan for its early childhood education models. Practices common before the Cultural Revolution were restored. Needs currently faced by preschools are those of increasing children's science learning and correcting personality traits of single children which the government considers undesirable. A reference list of 15 items is provided. (BC)

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Early Childhood Education in China: Political Implications

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An Historical Overview: 1949-1966

> "The world is yours, as well as ours, but in the last analysis, it is yours. You young people, full of vigor and vitality, are in the bloom of life, like sun at eight or nine in the morning. Our hope is placed on you"...
> "The world belongs to you. China's future belongs to you".
> Mao Tse-Tung, 1957

To begin to understand the current role of early childhood education in China, one must investigate it's past, from preliberation until the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Prior to 1949, few preschools existed (Sidel, 1972, Tobin, Wu, and Davidson, 1989) and those that were established served only the very wealthy. Children of the Bourgeois played games, sang songs and danced while much of China's male population and almost all of it's female population received little or no schooling, leaving China virtually illiterate (Kessen, 1975).

The Communist Revolution in 1949 brought about many changes. It was evident that a new educational policy would include many elements proclaimed by Mao Tse-Tung. The resulting system would clearly not be a copy of traditional Chinese nor Western models, but would be more along the lines of what had emerged in the Soviet Union. This, at least for the time being, would provide a model for China (Hawkins, 1974). Many have referred to the postrevolutionary period (1949-1957) as the golden era of socialist transformation of important institutions, including preschools (Tobin et al, 1989). Indeed, by the early 1950's the first generation of socialist preschool educators established a strong foundation for

the future of preschool education. These individuals embodied impressive educational qualifications and proper ideology as they authored the first set of official kindergarten guidelines in 1952. Preschool pedagogy was heavily influenced by Pavlovian thought, with emphasis placed on conditioning children's behavior. However, consideration was also given to providing a comfortable environment, good food and ample time for play and sleep. These latter considerations epitomized the philosophy of childhood being a golden age. Often times the best morsels of food were given to the youngest child. "A proper Chinese infant is one who is so plump with nourishment that there can be no doubt about his good health, or of his parents' concern that he survive infancy and grow up to take care of them when they return, in old age, to a similar state of dependency" (Solomon, 1971). Preschool children occupied a unique place in Chinese society. Their clothing, symbolic of their status, was far more colorful and decorative than that of adults or children older than seven. These children were objects of more overt warmth and physical contact and were given far more behavioral leeway and far less discipline (Sidel, 1982). During this era, the slogan of "loving the children as their own mothers love them" was raised in child-care circles. It helped improve child care and teaching of preschool children.[1]

In 1954, the Beijing government organized workshops that brought nurses and preschool educators together from all across China. Their goal was to share experiences and exchange ideas

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[1] "Motherly Love" *Beijing Review,* **23** (June 2, 1980): 27.

concerning the child's welfare. In 1956, theoretical workers (professors) and practical workers (teachers and administrators) collaborated on the drafting of the *The Guidebook of Kindergarten Education*. This manual was distributed to schools across China. One year later, *Rules for Kindergarten Curriculum* was published along with the nation's first early childhood journal, *Xue Qian Jiao Yu (Preschool Education)*. The latter was a joint effort between the Minister of Public Health, Beijing Normal University and the Chinese Youth and Children's Publisher (Tobin et al, 1989). The number of nursing rooms (for children aged 56 days to 18 months), nurseries (for children aged 18 months to 3 years) and kindergartens (for children aged 3 years to 6 1/2 years) was growing steadily in 1957. Much of this growth mirrored the economic development of rural areas brought about by Chairman Mao's "Great Leap Forward". The Chairman stressed that the primary aim of education was to serve proletarian politics and to be integrated with productive labor. It was necessary to make intellectuals identified with the laboring people and vise-versa (Hawkins, 1974). Thus, the term "Red and Expert" was coined (Kwong, 1979). According to Mao, educated members of society were to be politically aware and possess a theoretical understanding as well as a technical proficiency of their work. As a result, China's institutes of higher learning began to formulate an academic hierarchy based solely on rigorous intellectual standards. Academic achievement was stressed and competition increased. Students recruited from the country, who had schooling inferior to their urban counterparts began to feel inadequate. They could not compete academically; moreover, ideology

and political work at which they excelled, were being de-emphasized (Sidel, 1972). By 1963, a system of elite schools was organized. Certain boarding preschools were established for the cadres, a group quickly becoming a privileged class. Mao now viewed this educational system as gradually becoming divorced from the policies he had earlier advocated. He noted that schooling does not necessarily make an educated man and felt that too much formal education was actually harmful to the development of the individual (Hawkins, 1974). The Great Leap forward did not survive the setbacks it encountered in the early 1960's. Economic shortcomings, a series of natural disasters and the withdrawal of Soviet technicians all contributed to it's eventual demise.

A reexamination was in the works. Institutions, cadres and even the Communist Party itself all had to be reevaluated. A rebellion against elitists, professionalism and credentialism was organized, Chairman Mao began to put politics back in command. On May 25th, 1966, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution reaffirmed to the people that being "Red" took precedence over being "Expert".

A Great Revolution in the Education of Children: The Cultural Revolution, 1966-1976

> "The prophets of imperialism have studied the changes in the Soviet Union and have placed their hopes for 'peaceful change' in the third or fourth generation of the Chinese Communist Party. We must totally eliminate this imperialist prophecy".
>
> Mao Tse-Tung, 1966

The values and attitudes taught in preschool facilities during the Cultural Revolution were some of the clearest expressions of Mao's policies and politics in all of China. Children as young as 56 days old were taught to love the workers, peasants and soldiers to care for each other, love and help each other, to love Chairman Mao, to love labor and above all, to serve the people. The majority of this instruction was carried out in stories, skits, songs and dances, however, art work and even arithmetic problems contained these same messages. "After all, they are considered citizens of China who have responsibilities to their society, therefore, they need to be familiar with current political thinking" (Sidel, 1982). Nurseries and kindergartens no longer gave consideration to a comfortable environment, good food nor ample time for play and sleep. Now the emphasis was on carrying out proletarian politics. The question was raised as to if preschool children were too young to be educated in class struggle. The Beijing government quickly responded, "If the children can understand that the fox is tricky and the wolf can devour a person, why can't they understand the barbarous aggression of U.S. imperialism and the exploitive behavior of capitalists and landlords? Why can't we, by educating them to love Chairman Mao, to love the Communist Party, to love the laboring people, teach them to hate those bastards, monsters and freaks"? (Lo-p'ei, Tung-ping, 1966). It was becoming evident that the education of children was important to the success of the Party and to the consolidation of the proletarian dictatorship (Sidel, 1972). Not all preschools were up to this task however, and by the late 1960's, many were closed. The

remainder were given a political name (The East is Red, East Wind) to solidify their antibourgeois thought.

The job of administrating these schools was taken out of the hands of trained individuals and given over to ideological correct committees. Most institutions throughout China replaced management with these revolutionary groups. The five member committees were comprised of two workers from the Mao Tse-Tung propaganda team (in some instances, People's Liberation Army members replaced the propaganda team), two teachers and one revolutionary cadre. Their main responsibility was to evolve a working philosophy that would keep the preschool in touch with the masses. This was accomplished by engaging the school in struggle, criticism and transformation. A higher authority, usually a communist party branch committee member, however, did make policy decisions for the school. Yet another responsibility of the committee was to either dismiss the current staff to labor and reeducation in the country or to demote them to such positions as janitor or teacher's aide. A small percentage of previous staff were sent home due to their complete lack of correct ideology. These individuals were deemed unfit for any type of work and were expected to shout slogans and attend meetings until they were rehabilitated. Because these committees did not possess their predecessors' abilities or experiences, conflicts concerning the issues of how to implement policy arose (Kwong, 1988). However, there did appear to be general consensus on major values and goals.

Indeed, these values and goals centered around keeping the spirit alive. Older individuals were given the enormous task of

keeping the pre-Revolution bitterness and suffering constantly on the minds of China's youth. "Aunties" and "Uncles" would relate, often times graphic tales of how they were victimized by cruel landlords. Children were also told of the evils being perpetrated by U.S. imperialists in Vietnam and throughout southeast Asia. These lessons prompted some preschoolers to react violently, "when some of the little friends saw Johnson's (President Lyndon Johnson) face in the picture gallery, they wanted to go and pull out his eyes" (Lo-p'ei, Tung-ping, 1966). Songs, stories and dances all centered around the basic Revolutionary components of morality, education, ideology, labor and Chairman Mao. In addition, each child was expected to spend one fifty minute period each week engaged in productive labor (i.e. sweeping the floor, planting seeds, or preparing vegetables for the meal). To round off this political education, children engaged in vigorous running and calisthenics. Outdoor play and action games were also part of the schedule.

Nurseries and kindergartens clearly had a set of goals. In addition to providing protective care for children while parents worked, their purpose was to develop boys and girls who would continue the Revolution. The revolutionary committees had the responsibility of seeing that political objectives were accomplished and that the program was effective. Thus, the Beijing government felt an urgency to expand nurseries and kindergartens as fast as possible to ensure that the Revolution would succeed and be perpetuated. This extreme philosophy prompted two Western visitors to conclude, "Seeing so many Chinese dedicated to 'Serving the people, the country and Chairman Mao', we could not help but feel

concern about the possible impact on the world of such effective organization, starting with the youngest children" (Jeffery, Lindberg, 1974).

Fooled by the Gang of Four: 1976-1990

> "Compared with the immediate past, this younger generation has undergone very great changes. Lin Biao and the gang of four once fooled thousands of young people (that is, this younger generation and their brothers and sisters) by exploiting their political fervor which has hurt them tremendously".
>
> Zhong Peizhang, *Beijing Review,* 1980

The Cultural revolution officially ended with the death of Chairman Mao in 1976 and the arrest of the "gang of four", however, it took several years before most preschools were reopened. In 1979, the Ministry of Education sought out the assistance of educators from Beijing, Shanghi and Tienjing to draft new regulations for both urban kindergartens. It was suggested that nurseries and kindergartens adopt a style reminiscent of the "old liberated areas". This philosophy suggests that China return to the more authentic revolutionary traditions of 1949 when education was viewed as being as important a tool as work in continuing the proletarian struggle. The need to promote the quality and quantity of nurseries and kindergartens was paramount. The first directive was to "elevate the political position of nurses and teachers" (Tobin et al, 1989). This statement, issued by Beijing, meant that the previously denounced and harshly treated preschool professionals were now once again accepted as respected members of society.

Nurseries and kindergartens were reopened, however, staffing requirements were lacking, a decade's worth of preschool educators as well as teacher trainers was lost. The government began searching for new ideas from more advanced countries, however, the Soviet Union, the country who was instrumental in the development of Communist China's educational system, was no longer considered an advanced country. China now turned it's attention to the United States and Japan. Scholars were now freely traveling abroad in an attempt to catch up with educational developments. Academic meetings and professional journals were reestablished for the first time in several years. Gone are the days of disorder in he classroom, when teachers only looked after the children and taught them quotations from Chairman Mao. No longer can the rest of the world look at Chinese education as a joke (Chin, 1988).

The Chinese educational pendulum, consistently in motion, has swung from an emphasis on political ideology to an emphasis on technical skills or, as the Chinese would say, from being "Red" to being "Expert" (Sidel, 1982). This swing has produced some new philosophies, as well as reinstating some old policies from the early 1960's. In the last few years, Chinese schools have been gradually led on the correct path. Many useful practices common before the Cultural Revolution have been restored and improved (Zuo, 1980). The feeling of maternal love, once thought of as a bourgeois theory of human nature, was openly invited back into the classroom. Competition also became a part of the new curriculum. A simple game of matching colors becomes a vehicle for accomplishing a task without a mistake. A child's innate ability, an issue not discussed

during the Cultural Revolution, is now an important area to be researched, "Differences in intelligence are determined mainly by the later education they receive".[2] The child's age is now taken into consideration when curriculum is being developed. Children are taught concepts according to their age and natural inclinations, through games and in ordinary routine. Nurseries and kindergartens are becoming child oriented centers where full use of toys and audiovisual aids are used to enhance learning. Above all, the preschool experience encourages the children to view themselves as active participants in a society which they can help mold. It helps to demystify the workings of that society by encouraging the children to analyze and solve societal problems through song and dance, stories and other activities (Sidel, 1982).

Political thought has not been abandoned in the nurseries and kindergartens. Ideological and moral education is conducted through assigning the children exercises, organizing recreational and other daily activities. Children are taught the "Five Loves" through work and play. These loves comprise love of the motherland, the people, science, physical labor and collective property. These five loves are the same as those referred to during the Cultural Revolution, with one great exception. Love of science has replaced love of the leader. This substitution serves the dual purpose of emphasizing science as part of the modernization of China as well as de-emphasizing the role of the individual leaders, also known as the de-Maoization effort (Sidel, 1982). The Beijing government has launched a large

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[2] "Preschool Education" *Beijing Review*, 24 (May 25, 1981): 27

"We Love Science" campaign throughout China. The aim of this ambitious program was to make every boy and girl realize the importance of science in he nation's efforts to achieve the four modernizations.[3] Children were given a choice of telling a story about science, doing a small scientific experiment, giving a scientific explanation of a natural phenomenon or discussing certain aspects of a branch of science. China's youth is very aware of the need to be science literate if they are going to compete in a global economy.

China is currently undergoing a zero population growth movement. This mandate states that citizens have only one child. "One born, one well nurtured, one well educated". This appears to be working, given the fact that in 1985, 90 percent of the children entering preschools in both Nanjing and Beijing were single children (Tao, Chiu, 1985). This one child family concerns child development experts as well as the government, for the Chinese feel that a child indulged by as many as six adults is likely to come to think of himself as a "little sun" (Tobin et al. 1989). This problem is also referred to as the 4-2-1 syndrome (four grandparents, two parents and one child). Research has pointed to several undesirable traits exhibited by these single children including: bossiness, obstinacy and disrespect for elders. Beijing feels that these individuals will grow up to be counterrevolutionaries. Thus, one role of the preschool is to break this cycle. Children are toileted as a group, and at many times are boarded at the school. Collectivism is the main goal of

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[3] "Children Study Science", *Beijing Review* 22 (May 11, 1979): 8

these policies, a policy in the light of Tienenmen square, 1988, may have to be redefined.

China currently has 7.87 million students in nurseries and kindergartens, with 1.7 million individuals working to take care of them.[4] The Beijing government realizes that by the 20's or 30's of the next century, these children will become the pillars of their country and the successors to their cause (Gardner, 1989).

Conclusion

> "Generally speaking, we should study and make use of laws governing the mental growth of children.
> Therefore, it is necessary to develop a new science of education in China under the name of Educational Engineering".
> "Pre-school Education", *Beijing Review,* 1981

This paper's opening statement, "To begin to understand the current role of early childhood education in China, one must investigate it's past", only begins to shed light on a complex situation. To obtain a thorough understanding, one must completely divest himself from his culture, his way of life. Through some magical transformation of the spirit, one must wear the crown of Confucism, the shroud of communism and the breast plate of Chinese culture. Only then can one receive a full understanding of this complicated subject. Unfortunately, no out of the body experience was achieved, and no special light or wisdom was obtained. The only source of knowledge was gathered through a series of articles and

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[4] "Care for 380 Million Children" *Beijing Review,* 24 (April 6, 1981): 5

texts, many of them dated. Through the investigation of these writings, some interesting similarities as well as differences were noted.

It is not difficult to get the wrong impression about Chinese youth. Some literature portrays them as rigid mechanical beings, able to vocalize the "Five Loves" or preach the party line. Indeed, these young children do gladden their countries leadership by occasionally impressing a tour group, however these same children are more at home catching dragonflies and sparrows. Ironically, the same individuals who take pleasure in listening to their children spout out proletarian rhetoric, are fierce protectors of their innocence. These preschoolers are allowed brightly colored clothes, candy and leeway. Their American counterparts could also maintain this simple lifestyle if it were not for all our capitalist trappings.

Many Chinese youth board at school, they also use the bathroom facilities simultaneously with their peers. It is these same images that for some individuals lend distance between us and them, after all they are communists. What is not witnessed is the universal behavior all children posses. These children experience separation anxiety, they like it at home and would rather be there. These are experiences that no form of government can override.

China has both a long rich history as well as a short violent past. It's main focus (like any other culture) is one of survival in a world that is rapidly changing. When things become confusing, it tends to close in on itself, possibly making things more confusing. However, this world's most populace country looks to its youth as a source of the future, lending it a certain amount of credibility.

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